

Junior Ranger Nature Notes

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FLYING FOXES

We are lucky here in the Northern Territory because we have over 35 species of bats, the largest of which are the flying foxes. If you live in the Top End you have surely seen or heard them but you would not have in central Australia as it is way too cold for them.



Bats belong to a special group of mammals that scientists call *Chiroptera* (which literally means 'hand-wing').

JUST LIKE US

Flying foxes, like all bats, are placental mammals just like us. This means that their babies remain inside their mother's bodies until they are well and truly developed. When born they have all their body bits, but they just need to grow.

When born (usually in March and April in the Top End) the baby can't fly, so it holds on for dear life to its mother's fur with its clawed feet. All the while its mouth is attached to one of the nipples under her armpit. After about a month mum will leave her baby in a nursery (along with other babies) when she leaves camp to feed at night. After a couple of months the baby can fly and by three months will leave the camp to grab a feed. If they are lucky, flying foxes can live for 15 years.

BIIIIG BATS!

Flying foxes and blossom bats belong in a group scientists call **Megabats**. They are also often known as 'fruit bats' as they love to feed on fruit, flowers and nectar. They were called 'flying foxes' because their heads look similar to those of foxes. For they have big eyes, ears and noses, all the better to see, smell, navigate and find food with. Most Australian bats belong to another very different group called **Microbats**. These are usually much smaller and eat mostly insects. They use echolocation (animal sonar) to find their way in the dark, as they have poor eyesight and are nearly "blind as a bat".

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

Here are two of our most common Top End flying foxes.

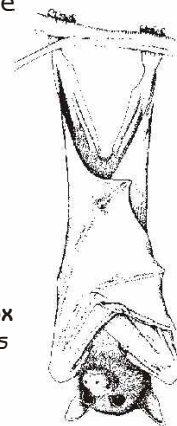
Black Flying Fox
Pteropus alecto

Fur is generally jet black often with a reddish brown patch on the back of the neck.

Little Red Flying Fox
Pteropus scapulatus

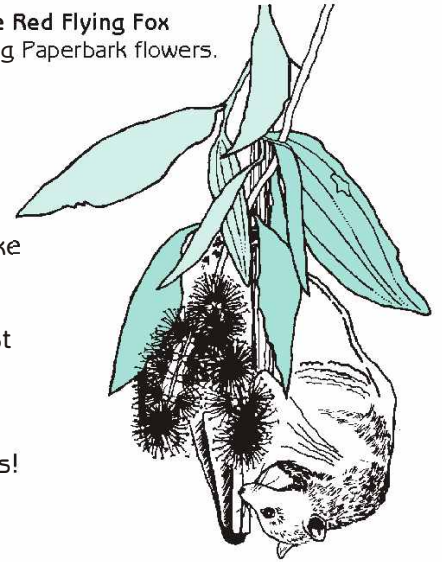
Fur is a rich reddish-brown to light brown.

In flight the wings are almost see-through.



The largest Australian bat. With a wingspan of up to 1.5m and weighing about 1kg.

Little Red Flying Fox eating Paperbark flowers.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

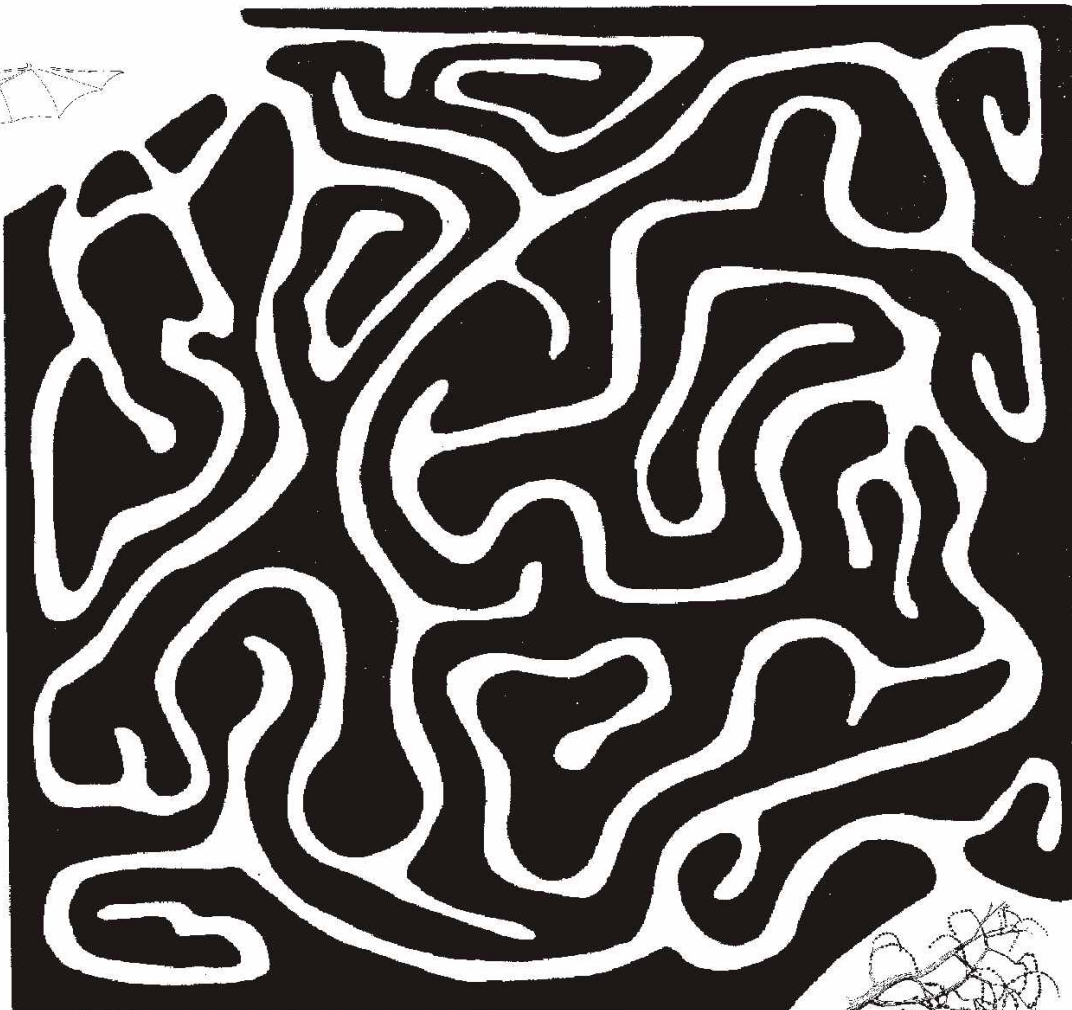
Black Flying Foxes eat whatever grows in the area where they live. At dusk they stream out from their camps in search of flowers and fruit. They love the fruits of native trees like Billy Goat Plum, Carpentaria Palm and all the native figs. The Little Red Flying Fox has much smaller teeth, so it likes to eat the flowers of trees like paperbarks.

Both are notorious raiders of introduced fruit trees in and around our backyards. They just adore mangoes! They actually crush the fruit in their mouth, then swallow the juices and seeds and spit out the rest. If they swallowed the pulp then they would probably be too heavy to fly. Flying foxes must go to the toilet 'right side-up.' So they must hang from their thumbs to do so or they can go inflight - otherwise they would wear it on their faces!

DRIVING US BATTY!

Many Top Enders have been victim of what comes bombing out from the flying fox's rear end. Parking your car under a camp or roost tree is not a good idea unless you want it redecorated! In fact, if you don't wash their poo off of your car straight away then after a couple of days you will find that the paint has been eaten away!

Help this hungry Black Flying fox find its way through the dark to a palm fruit feast!



Want to learn more about Flying Foxes?
Check out the books *Australian Bats* by Sue Churchill and *Flying Foxes: Fruit and Blossom Bats of Australia* by Leslie Hall and Greg Richards.